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The Athletic / Could Blue Jackets pursue Mitch Marner via free agency? They've tried before

By Aaron Portzline – June 10, 2025

Summer 2019 was a bittersweet time for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

They'd just swept the Presidents' Trophy-winning Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs — one of the greatest upsets in NHL history — to earn the first series win in franchise history. But the Blue Jackets' two star players, forward Artemi Panarin and goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, were poised to leave as free agents.

The Jackets, under then-general manager Jarmo Kekäläinen, were desperate to show the world there could be life after Bread and Bob, but they would need some high-level reinforcements to make that happen. And they did, in fact, go big-game hunting that summer.

To this day, it's hard to say how serious the talks were between the Blue Jackets and Toronto Maple Leafs star forward Mitch Marner, then a 22-year-old restricted free agent.

But as *The Athletic* reported back then, Kekäläinen and Darren Ferris, Marner's agent, at least discussed the possibility of signing Marner to an offer sheet.

Marner ultimately stayed with the Maple Leafs, signing a six-year, \$65.4 million contract during which he cemented his status as one of the NHL's top talents. That contract expires July 1, and Marner is set to hit the market, this time as an unrestricted free agent.

The Blue Jackets, now with Don Waddell in the GM's chair, are expected to pursue Marner again, but they'll have plenty of competition. Several clubs suddenly have money to spend after the NHL's salary cap increased for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Waddell has said since he arrived last summer that the Blue Jackets' "rebuild" is finished and they're now in the business of winning. Though many saw last season as a success — the Jackets were the last club to be eliminated from playoff contention — the club's management, coaches and players were deeply aggravated.

And though Waddell's biggest task is cleaning up the club's mix-and-match defensive corps and questionable goaltending, Columbus could use help on its top two scoring lines, too.

You make room for a player like Marner, who has three 90-point seasons and a 100-point season in his nine-year career. For context: No Blue Jackets player has ever scored more than 87 points in a season.

What's the pitch?

Let's get the difficult part out of the way first — why would Marner, with half of the league making pitches, choose Columbus? Let us count the ways, in no particular order:

1. Less glare

For the last nine years, Marner has lived in the fishbowl of Toronto and — fairly or unfairly — he's become the face of the Maple Leafs' playoff woes. The Leafs have won only two playoff series since he's played in Toronto, and they've never made it past the second round.

The Blue Jackets certainly have playoff aspirations in 2025-26 and beyond. But Marner might benefit from stepping away from the chaos of playing in Toronto to a smaller market where he can live and play without a 24-hour spotlight pointed at him.

2. Proximity

Marner has been married for two years. He became a father for the first time just last month. Not only has Columbus drawn rave reviews from veteran players as a “great place to raise a family,” but it’s a great spot to live if you want to be close to family in Toronto ... but not too close.

Johnny Gaudreau chose Columbus for exactly those two reasons. Sean Monahan came here to play with Gaudreau, but he’s since fallen in love with the city for its ease of living. These are only recent examples, but it’s been the franchise’s selling point since the early days.

There’s a reason so many players have either settled here or are planning to when their careers are finished.

3. Ready to win

There are plenty of question marks on the Blue Jackets roster, and to watch the Stanley Cup Finals is to realize how far away they still might be. But the Jackets will be a trendy pick to make the playoffs in the Eastern Conference next season, and their considerable youth suggests they might just be getting started.

With centers Monahan and Adam Fantilli in the top six, and Cole Sillinger in the middle of the third line, the Blue Jackets are as strong (and young) down the middle as they’ve ever been. With Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson, they have budding elite-level wingers.

Marner, one of the league’s top playmakers, could make them a truly dangerous outfit, and when you add top-level talent to the mix, everybody around them gets better.

Picture this: the Blue Jackets with a power play.

4. \$\$\$

As noted above, the rising salary cap has given most teams enough leeway to carry out their business this summer. Marner will have no shortage of suitors.

According to PuckPedia, only the San Jose Sharks (\$41.7 million) are projected to have more salary-cap space than the Blue Jackets (\$40.4 million). The number will almost certainly shrink before July 1, with defensemen Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro, forward Justin Danforth and possibly others signing contracts before they hit free agency.

The Blue Jackets, though, would be able to make Marner the highest-paid player in the league if that’s what it took to secure him. Toronto’s Auston Matthews is the NHL’s highest-paid player at \$13.25 million per season, but Leon Draisaitl’s eight-year, \$14 million AAV extension kicks in July 1. Columbus has the space to match or exceed that.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Changes coming soon, but which UFAs stick around

By Aaron Portzline – June 8, 2025

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: Internal UFAs

Just think, one month from now — after the NHL buyout window opens and closes, the entry draft is held, and the league’s free agency bonanza plays out — the Blue Jackets could look significantly different than the club that barely missed the playoffs in April.

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell wants to add a top-six forward. He also wants to upgrade the defense, particularly on the right side. And, though everybody within the organization is playing it coy, there’s a sense they want to make sweeping changes in goal, too.

Yeah, that’s all.

However, before Waddell gets to his roster adds, he’ll have to make some difficult decisions about who stays and who goes. The Blue Jackets have nine players who are pending unrestricted free agents, meaning they could sign with any team on July 1 unless Columbus re-signs them first.

Except for two unrestricted free agents whom Waddell wants to sign, this is a landscape with many moving parts, such that a few veteran UFAs might be exposed to free agency even if there’s a chance the Blue Jackets end up retaining them.

“I’ve talked to some of (the UFAs),” Waddell told *The Athletic*. “I haven’t talked to all of them. There are some priority guys, but we’re going to make some changes.”

Here’s a breakdown of those players, sorted by the likelihood that they’ll be back in a Blue Jackets sweater in 2025-26:

Want to keep

Ivan Provorov, D: This one has been simmering for some time. Waddell met with Provorov’s agent, Mark Gandler, at the NHL scouting combine in Buffalo last week, but it’s unclear if anything has changed. Provorov is 28, which makes it the perfect time for him to land a long-term contract. He could sign for seven years on the open market or eight years with Columbus, but the Blue Jackets have tried to get him under contract with a shorter term. Both sides can justify their positions, and the talks have remained amicable. As unsettled as the Jackets’ blue line has been, it would be hard to let the sturdy, reliable Provorov walk.

Dante Fabbro, D: Playing next to Zach Werenski is a sweet assignment, but not everybody can keep up. Fabbro, a waiver claim from Nashville early last season, clicked instantly and was a much-needed upgrade on the right side. Fabbro had 9-17-26 and a career-high plus-23 in only 62 games, and there will most definitely be a market for him, especially as a right-shot guy with moderate skill. But if the Jackets keep both Provorov and Fabbro, are they making big changes on the back end?

Might keep

Justin Danforth, F: Not sure what this means — Danforth declined to elaborate — but the 30-year-old versatile forward switched agents this offseason. Pat Morris now represents him. It appears that

Danforth wants to stay with the Blue Jackets, which gave him his NHL opportunity. However, Waddell must be smart and remain flexible. Danforth's ability to take right-side faceoffs is a plus, but the Jackets might seek other options if they can't meet on terms.

James van Riemsdyk, F: It would be hard to let van Riemsdyk walk after all he meant to the Blue Jackets last season. He scored 16 goals and 36 points in limited minutes. He played up and down the lineup, never looking out of place. He was the immovable, marble statue in front of opposing goalies, which every team needs. Those late-season scratches of van Riemsdyk still don't make any sense, do they?

Moving on

Sean Kuraly, C: This one stings. Kuraly signed four years ago with the Blue Jackets, his hometown team, to help stop the bleeding when it seemed like every significant player was requesting a trade. The four years didn't go as he expected, but this season was certainly a high point. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason sharply curtailed his playing time and curiously took him off the penalty kill, which is usually a sign of disfavor.

Jack Johnson, D: The Jackets used Johnson more than they expected. He played 41 games — exactly half the season — and provided some physicality on the third pair and penalty kill, especially after Erik Gudbranson went down. But, seriously, if the Blue Jackets are going to make changes on defense, they can't all come back.

Luke Kunin, F: Waddell parted with a fourth-round pick to acquire Kunin at the trade deadline, but it wasn't a perfect fit. He played 12 games to no great distinction.

Christian Fischer, F: A waiver claim by the Blue Jackets at the NHL trade deadline, but Fischer played only one game in the final month of the season.

Kevin Labanc, F: Waddell added Labanc off waivers before the start of the season because they were desperate for veteran forwards after a crush of late training camp injuries. He played 34 decent games before a shoulder injury ended his season.

Item No. 2: Picks available

The Blue Jackets have had seven first-round draft picks in the last four NHL drafts, four of them in the top 6 and six of them in the top 12 of the draft. The *building* continues, with Waddell looking to make significant roster upgrades. But the *rebuilding* is done.

Waddell heads to this year's draft armed with two first-round draft picks: He has the Blue Jackets' pick at No. 14 overall but also has the Minnesota Wild's first-round pick at No. 20. That was acquired early last season when defenseman David Jiricek was traded to the Wild.

Nobody expects Waddell to select a player with both of those picks. He's already dangling one (or both) of them in front of other GMs in an attempt to get immediate roster help.

The Athletic asked Waddell this week to put a percentage chance on the likelihood he selects a player with each of his first-round picks.

"I think it's 50-50 (that we take) both," he said. "I *could* move both of them. If we're helping our team immediately, I'm not opposed to that, for sure. Probably, though, I would think we'd keep one of them. But I can't say 100 percent.

"Like I always say, you never know what's going to be presented to you or what you can chase down. You have to keep your options open, that's for sure."

Item No. 3: Staff changes

The Blue Jackets have promoted Aron Augustitus to video goal coach, replacing Dan Singleton, who had held the position since the franchise's inception until his contract was not renewed after this season. Augustitus had served as Singleton's assistant for the past four seasons.

Waddell said he's "getting close" on hiring an equipment manager and is beginning the process of finding a strength and conditioning coach. In the meantime, Blue Jackets players are utilizing their off-season conditioning resources under the guidance of Ryan Gadbois, who has served as Kevin Collins' assistant for the past four seasons.

Late last month, the Blue Jackets informed team services director Julie Gamble, who started during the inaugural season, that she wouldn't be back with the club for next season. Waddell indicated that a replacement will likely be hired from within the organization.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- It became clear in recent NHL awards shows that the league needed to change the format to breathe new energy into the proceedings.

Part of that involves presenting most of the awards before the show, surprising the award winners in meaningful ways, and capturing the moments on video.

None were more meaningful than Meredith Gaudreau showing up at the suburban Toronto home of Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan to present him with the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

Monahan was surprised, he said. "I had no idea. I was kind of waiting around all dressed up for a while because I was told we were doing family pictures. My mom was here to help with the little guy (Leo). It was ... it caught me off guard. It was presented in a special way. They did a great job to surprise me."

- The Masterton Trophy is voted on by members of the Pro Hockey Writers' Association, and 209 members filed ballots this year.

Monahan, with 523 points, edged finalists Gabriel Landeskog of Colorado (431) and Marc-Andre Fleury of Minnesota (293) to become the first Blue Jackets player to win the award.

Monahan received 75 first-place votes and appeared as a top-three pick on 141 ballots. Other receiving first-place votes: Landeskog (58), Fleury (32), Washington's Alex Ovechkin (16), Vancouver's Dakota Joshua (six), Philadelphia's Ivan Fedotov (five), Tampa Bay's Ryan McDonagh (four), Calgary's Justin Kirkland, Chicago's Pat Maroon, and Utah's Mikhail Sergachev (two), Los Angeles' Drew Doughty, Toronto's John Tavares, St. Louis' Ryan Suter, Carolina's Jordan Staal, San Jose's Marc Edouard Vlasic, Anaheim's John Gibson, Boston's Joonas Korpi (one).

- Evason finished fifth in voting for the Jack Adams Trophy, awarded late last week to Washington Capitals coach Spencer Carbery. Evason received five second-place votes and 15 third-place votes, finishing behind Carbery, Winnipeg's Scott Arniel, Montreal's Martin St. Louis and St. Louis' Jim Montgomery.
- After spending four seasons as an assistant coach with the Vegas Golden Knights and the past two in the same capacity with the Dallas Stars, Columbus native Misha Donskov has worked his way to the cusp of getting an NHL head coaching job.

Donskov, who went deep in the process with the Boston Bruins and might have interviewed for other openings this off-season, now has an opportunity before him with the Stars. Last week, Dallas fired coach Pete DeBoer, embarking on a coaching search at a point in the off-season when all of the other openings are filled.

Donskov, whose family owns Donskov Strength and Conditioning, Inc. in Columbus, was interviewed by the Blue Jackets after leaving Vegas in 2023, but joined the Stars instead.

- The Blue Jackets signed center Oiva Keskinen to a three-year, entry-level deal earlier this month after a solid season for Tappara Tampere in Finland's top league.

Keskinen, a seventh-round pick (No. 194 overall) in 2023, will attend the development camp, the NHL prospects camp and NHL training camp, Waddell said, but he'll be one to watch as training camp progresses into its final days. There is a stipulation in his contract that allows him to return to Finland for one more season if he doesn't make the Blue Jackets' roster out of camp.

- Cayden Lindstrom, the Jackets' No. 4 overall pick last summer, flew home to Vancouver (from Medicine Hat) earlier this week to get a few days around family and friends. But he'll be back in Columbus later this month, arriving the week of the draft and staying through development camp, which he mostly missed last season (back injury).

In early July, he'll head to East Lansing, Mich. — he's committed to Michigan State in the fall — to take part in the Spartans' six-week off-season camp. Then, after a 7-to 10-day trip back to Vancouver, he'll return to East Lansing to prepare for the start of the academic school year. He won't be able to attend the annual prospects tournament or NHL training camp because it conflicts with his college schedule.

- Lindstrom was asked if he had any issues with the knee-on-knee hit he absorbed from Spokane's Saige Weinstein during the Western Hockey League championship series. Lindstrom was not 100 percent the rest of the way, missing the first game of the Memorial Cup.

"Nah, I walked into that one," Lindstrom said. "I was rounding (making a sharp turn) and just ran into him. I have no issues with it. I'd try to lay a hit, too, if somebody was rounding behind the net."

- Simon Olivier, father of Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier, was named head coach of the Victoriaville Tigres of the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League. After retiring as a player in 2009, Olivier has coached at several different levels, including four seasons as an assistant coach with Victoriaville.

- On Dec. 18, 2020, *The Athletic* published a lengthy piece on former Columbus Chill player Al Novakowski, who detailed the sexual abuse he said he suffered at the hands of former Ohio State team doctor Richard Strauss.

Novakowski's story, along with those of other Strauss victims, is told in a one-hour, 48-minute documentary called "Surviving Ohio State."

The film, produced by George Clooney and directed by Academy Award winner Eva Orner, makes its debut this weekend at the Tribeca Film Festival, which is underway in New York City. The documentary premieres on HBO on June 17.

The Athletic / Who says no to these NHL trades (involving things that cannot actually be traded)?

By Sean McIndoe – June 11, 2025

In the NHL, you can't trade coaches. There was a time when you could, and it happened in 1987, when New York Rangers GM Phil Esposito sent a first-round pick to the Quebec Nordiques for head coach Michel Bergeron in a surprise swap. It was a creative move. It also didn't work, with Bergeron lasting less than two seasons, and the league quickly moved to make sure it wouldn't be tried again. These days, coaches are one of many assets a team is not allowed to trade.

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Or are they? After all, we occasionally see coaching quasi-trades, like when John Tortorella and Alain Vigneault essentially swapped teams after being fired in 2013. More recently, the Rangers and Penguins didn't actually pull off a Mike Sullivan and David Quinn for Dan Muse trade, but it kind of worked out that way.

Let's use that as inspiration. We've got time to kill between Stanley Cup Final games, so I put out a call to readers: Send me your "who says no?" trade proposals involving things that cannot actually be traded. And you sure did. Can we pull off a blockbuster, or will it just be too complicated to make a trade in the cap era NHL? Let's find out.

Note: Submissions have been edited for clarity and style.

What are the Leafs lacking? Heart and grit. They vowed to change their DNA in the offseason. They need to disrupt their core even if it means losing some skill and finesse. So:

To Edmonton: Carlton the Bear

To Toronto: Hunter the whatever that is

— Mike H.

As mascots go, Hunter is a lot worse but also more intimidating, which is probably exactly the sort of move the Leafs will be looking to make this summer. After all, if you're going to acquire a vicious, ugly animal with crazed eyes and no instincts beyond preying on the weak and vulnerable, at least Hunter comes cheaper than Sam Bennett.

But what's in it for the Oilers? Is the upgrade from Hunter to Carlton enough to justify disrupting a winning mix? I wasn't sure, so I reached out to the world's foremost experts on NHL mascots: Mark Lazerus' children. Here's what his daughter had to say:

"I think that a Hunter and Carlton trade wouldn't be good because real lynxes live in Alberta. Also, Carlton doesn't wear pants and Edmonton is really cold, so Carlton would freeze. In conclusion, Hunter is with his family and Carlton won't freeze his butt off."

The no-pants thing is a strong catch. Sorry, Leafs fans, but the Oilers say no.

To Pittsburgh: The rights to "Brass Bonanza"

To Carolina: Exclusive naming rights to Sebastian Aho

— Dan H.

I kind of love this one. Both teams are getting something of value. We might have a match.

And sure, it looks lopsided at first glance. “Brass Bonanza” is a legitimate star in this league. It’s solidly in the GOAT conversation when it comes to novelty goal songs. But it’s also the source of controversy among Hurricanes fans, with some embracing it while others see it as nostalgia for a team that they have no personal connection to.

So you could argue that the Hurricanes would benefit from making a clean break from the Whalers stuff, and getting the exclusive naming rights to your biggest star isn’t a bad way to do it. And of course, the Penguins get a fun new goal song that they can play (*checks current roster*) dozens of times during the season. I honestly think this one is a win-win.

(In related news, Other Sebastian Aho apparently signed with the Penguins last summer. Who knew?)

The PWHL receives: The Lady Byng, the Mark Messier, the Jennings, the King Clancy, the Clarence S. Campbell Bowl, the Prince of Wales trophy and a sixth-round pick

The NHL receives: The PWHL expansion process and the PWHL Gold Plan

— Peter B.

Terrible trade. The PWHL doesn’t just say no, it hangs up and immediately blocks the number as spam.

Seriously, what kind of HFBoards madness is this? It’s a classic “seven nickels for a silver dollar” trade proposal. You’re bundling up all the trophies that nobody wants and trying to get not one but two superstar-level concepts in return. This kind of lopsided offer would get you kicked out of my fantasy football league, Peter, do better.

St. Louis receives: the 2012 and 2014 Stanley Cup runs

Los Angeles receives: the Greatest Show on Turf success and the 1999 Super Bowl

— Dylan C.

As if L.A. would ever care about Rams football.

To the Arizona hockey ownership group: Terry Pegula

To Buffalo: Alex Meruelo

Meruelo is immediately placed on waivers and goes unclaimed. — Todd C.

Yeah, we had a lot of Sabres fans trying to offload Pegula, and let’s just say you weren’t asking for much in return. Real buy-low opportunity right here. I can’t imagine why.

Still, Arizona says no. This is a classic salary dump, where a big-money player who hasn’t been productive in years gets sent out to pasture. Given that, having the destination be Arizona is a nice touch. But while you’re taking a bad contract bad in Meruelo, I think Arizona’s going to want a few assets in return for taking Pegula’s bigger commitment.

To the Rangers: Jim Ramsay

To Montreal: Dancin’ Larry

— “Zach”

Other fan bases may need an explainer on this one. Ramsay is the trainer the Rangers fired a few years ago. He was hired in Montreal, but many Rangers fans still view his exit as a symptom of the dysfunction of the Chris Drury/Jim Dolan era. So from the New York perspective, you could view this as trying to right a wrong.

But Dancin' Larry, the Rangers superfan and scoreboard regular? He's fine, I guess, but I'm not completely sure he's a fit for Montreal. They're not really a dancing bunch, you know? Maybe if it was "Telling a Boring Story About Some Guy From the 1930s Larry" we'd have a fit, but right now I think Montreal says no, holding out for more. Maybe toss in a proper hot dog recipe, New York.

(By the way, I can't recommend Dancin' Larry's Instagram page highly enough. Just page after page of photos of him with Rangers fans, and he's doing the exact same face and pose in all of them. Not a pixel of difference. Seriously, it might just be a template. How do you move this guy? Get an NTC in that next extension, Larry, this can be a cruel business.)

To Dallas: Hosting the Minnesota state high school tournament through 2030

To Minnesota: The Stars/North Stars name, mascots, colors, jerseys

— Anonymous

I'll admit, I was surprised how many of you want to trade the old North Stars branding back to Minnesota. Apart from trades involving palm trees going to Buffalo or lower tax rates for California and New York, the North Stars stuff was the most common concept by far.

Does this deal work? It might. At least Dallas is getting something of value, which it could use to continue to build its fan base. I think the price is just too steep, given it'd be losing its name and branding. Dallas says no, but I could see a counteroffer involving just the classic North Stars stuff heading to Minnesota instead.

Then again, what if there were a way for Dallas to acquire new branding? Well, about that ...

Vancouver needs new ownership and it's always better if it's someone local. If only there was a Vancouverite who randomly owned another team in the league ... and if that team happened to have bad uniforms, that would be great, since the Canucks have three completely different logo/uniform/color schemes in their arsenal and can't seem to decide which one to run with.

To Vancouver: Owner Tom Gaglardi, who has always wanted to own the Canucks anyway

To Dallas: The orange, red and black "Flying Skate" uniform/color scheme, and an agreement to pay all costs associated with rebranding Dallas to something more appropriate, like Outlaws. — Phil G.

Hmm ...

I mean, part of the art of pulling off a truly great trade is finding an asset that's underappreciated, maybe because it's stuck down the depth chart. As Phil points out, the Canucks have one of the greatest uniform designs of all time just sitting around. The Flying Skate should be Vancouver's primary uniform — it never should have lost the job in the first place — but for whatever reason, it's not. OK, so let's send it somewhere that will give it the chance to be the superstar it should be. The logic is solid.

That said, you're not getting Gaglardi for a uniform. The owner may be the most important position on a modern NHL team, and Gaglardi would be a massive upgrade for the Canucks franchise. Dallas says no. But it's amicable. It's not closing the door if the Canucks wanted to circle on something down the road.

In the meantime, one more for the Canucks ...

To Vancouver: The Leafs' 1950-51 Stanley Cup win

To Toronto: The Canucks' 2011 Stanley Cup Final appearance

The Canucks get a Stanley Cup, but one so long ago they'll still be mocked by opposing fans. But one is better than zero. Did they exist in 1951? Let's not worry about the details.

The Leafs get yet another devastating loss to the Bruins in the playoffs, but at least this time in a Stanley Cup Final and all the good memories that go with that sort of run. A team that locals mostly like and have fond memories of, legends in the market. (Do not ask what other markets think.) All it costs is a Cup so long ago most fans don't remember it.

Note: Canucks retain the riot, due to a NMC. — Greg P.

On the surface, this one makes a lot of sense. The Canucks are getting the better asset — a Cup win is obviously better than a near-miss — but the recency bias plays a factor. And the Leafs are dealing from a position of strength, with the “old Cup wins that nobody really remembers” cupboard pretty much overflowing.

That said, Greg mentions the potential problem. While Vancouver fans hate how 2011 ended, it's still a pretty beloved version of the team. If you trade the whole run, that means you lose the Game 7 OT win over the Blackhawks, the Kevin Bieksa bank shot and other fun memories. Do you give all of that up just so you can ditch the Sabres at the “zero Cups in franchise history” table? You have to give up something to get something, but that's pretty steep.

My gut is that Vancouver says no, partly because it just doesn't want to let Leafs fans be happy. But I'd like to hear from Canucks fans in the comments to confirm.

And since we're trying to end some Leaf droughts ...

To Montreal: The 1967 Stanley Cup championship

To Toronto: The 1993 Stanley Cup championship

The 1967 Cup would give Montreal the last Original Six win and a second run of five straight Cups within a decade. And having won in 1986 would mean their current drought wouldn't be appreciably longer.

The '93 Cup reduces Toronto's drought dramatically, and gives them the honor of being the last Canadian team to win a Cup. Plus, we could stop talking about Kerry Fraser forever. — Sean B.

Who says no? Every other fan base. They lose out on making fun of the Leafs' record Cup drought, the Habs get even more ammo for their history-firehose, and the last Canadian Cup win somehow becomes even more of a thing because Toronto won't shut up about it. The only gain for the other fan bases would be Leafs fans giving the Fraser stuff a rest after 33 years, and let's be honest, we wouldn't honor that part of the deal.

So yeah, everyone else hates this deal ... which means there may be something here for the two teams involved. As beloved as that rag-tag band of old-timers from the 1967 team has become, I think this is a pretty easy “yes” for the Leafs. It's a little dicier for Montreal, although I think Sean B. is making a decent case.

Ultimately, while it's close, I think Montreal probably says no. Somebody break the bad news to Marty McSorley.

The Athletic / Free agent stock watch: How the NHL playoffs helped or hindered 10 players' outlooks

By Shayna Goldman and Harman Dayal – June 10, 2025

As much as a player can make an impact in the regular season, the playoffs are where legends are built. Players who thrive in the intensity and pressure of the Stanley Cup Playoffs often can write their ticket after, and those who wilt under the spotlight face questions until they prove otherwise.

Sometimes a player's stock doesn't change based on the playoffs. Corey Perry's next contract probably won't be influenced by what he is doing in Edmonton; realistically, most general managers interested in signing him will seek a low-risk, inexpensive contract with bonuses at this point in his career. Mikael Granlund's glow-up in San Jose and regular-season play in Dallas probably hold more weight than his playoffs, too.

But with free agency taking place just a couple of weeks after the postseason, recency bias can creep into player evaluations. It will likely fuel interest in Sam Bennett and raise more red flags for Mitch Marner.

So with the playoffs winding down and the offseason approaching, here's a look at 10 pending unrestricted free agents who may have seen their stock change this postseason.

Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs

Stock down

The spotlight was always going to be on Marner this postseason. It comes with the territory of playing in Toronto, where the pressure is mounting for the team to turn regular-season success into a deep playoff run. It also comes with a \$10.9 million cap hit, an expiring contract and a history of wilting under playoff pressure.

While Marner had standout flashes this postseason, he didn't meet the moment enough. Despite some highs, the lasting impression is what happened in some losing efforts: defensive lapses in Game 5, which pushed the Leafs to the brink of elimination, and a disappointing Game 7, where he was held scoreless and earned a minus-0.32 Game Score.

The Maple Leafs' elimination doesn't fall solely on his shoulders. Other stars faded and the scoring depth seriously lacked. Still, as much as he contributed, Marner didn't rise to the occasion enough when it mattered most. That might stop some contenders from handing him a blank check, despite being one of the few elite players to reach free agency in a rising cap world.

But there will be teams desperate for a player of his caliber, willing to spend \$13 million-plus with those playoff demons. And there might be some hope that he can be clutch *outside* of Toronto, like he was for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Nikolaj Ehlers, Winnipeg Jets

Stock up

There have been two prevailing narratives throughout Ehlers' career: he is underutilized in the regular season and doesn't make enough of an impact in the playoffs.

At his best, Ehlers is one of the Jets' top offensive threats between his play-driving and creativity in transition despite his usage. At his worst, he struggles in a playoff environment, which knocked him down to 5A in this year's Player Tiers, with team executives raising red flags about his postseason play.

That finally changed this year, as Ehlers raised his game when the pressure was the highest. Just take his gutsy cross-ice pass in the dying moments of Game 7 that helped keep the Jets' season alive. Or his two multi-goal games against the Stars to help the Jets make a Round 2 push.

After missing the first five games with injury, Ehlers ended the postseason with five goals and seven points in eight games, after only netting four goals and 14 points in his previous 37 playoff games.

There was always going to be interest in Ehlers this summer, as one of the few first-line-caliber forwards set to hit free agency. But his postseason improvement, after another strong regular season, should pump up his value even more.

Sam Bennett, Florida Panthers

Stock up

Bennett's regular-season resume isn't anything special — he's only hit the 50-point mark once in his career — but his clutch play in high-stakes games, divisive physicality and championship pedigree are perfectly built for playoff hockey. The hard-nosed 28-year-old center leads all players with 14 playoff goals this year, not to mention his strong showing for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Bennett's net-front scoring and gray-area shenanigans have drawn the most attention, but his hands and playmaking are an underrated part of his game, too. He's led crafty zone entries and made skilled passes off the rush in high-traffic areas. The Panthers have controlled over 57 percent of scoring chances and goals during Bennett's five-on-five shifts during these playoffs.

Overall, Bennett has scored 26 goals and 48 points in 59 playoff games over the last three years. In other words, the sample size of his elevating in big moments is large enough that it can't be chalked up to a fluke or coincidence — he's earned his label as a clutch playoff performer.

Couple that with how weak the free-agent center pool is, and Bennett is in a prime position to command the contract of his life if he decides to hit the July 1 market.

John Tavares, Toronto Maple Leafs

Stock neutral

It's easy to argue that Tavares' value should be lower after his postseason. There is a death-by-association element of being a part of the Maple Leafs' Core Four that once again fell short. And there is the fact that *he* underwhelmed on the scoresheet after a resurgent regular season. Tavares scored at a rate of 3.25 points per 60 in the regular season, which instilled some confidence in Toronto having more secondary scoring in the playoffs. But his pace slowed to 1.74 points per 60 in 13 playoff games, mostly due to dips at five-on-five.

All of that could tank his value. But there are a few reasons why his stock stayed neutral after another disappointing finish.

The reality is that the Leafs' problems are bigger than just Tavares, and more of the focus is on Marner and Matthews, who are expected to be The Guys, unlike the veteran at this point in his career. Plus, those 13 games don't wipe out an impressive regular season for the 34-year-old, who is aging gracefully (and has encouraging comparables like Sidney Crosby and Joe Pavelski at this point in his career). Pair all of that with a shallow center market behind Bennett, and it neutralizes the bad with good to steady his value.

Aaron Ekblad, Florida Panthers

Stock neutral

In slightly different circumstances, Ekblad would easily be considered a stock-up player. After all, the 6-foot-4 right-shot defender has soaked up nearly 24 minutes per game and handled tough defensive matchups en route to his third consecutive Stanley Cup Final appearance.

Ekblad has scored 12 points in 16 games, and the Panthers have controlled 57 percent of shot attempts and owned a plus-four goal differential during his five-on-five minutes. He hasn't been perfect — he'll occasionally get caught out of position up the ice because of his slow foot speed — but he's again excelled playing in a high-leverage top-four role on an elite team.

Another valuable playoff performance like this reinforces that Ekblad is worth a lucrative contract if he reaches free agency, but his market value likely isn't inflating by a massive degree for a couple of reasons.

Ekblad's positive test for a performance-enhancing substance in March, which landed him a 20-game suspension, could give some teams a reason to pause. The 29-year-old's durability must also be a concern — he has missed nearly 30 percent of Florida's regular-season games over the last five years.

Brad Marchand, Florida Panthers

Stock up

Marchand's days as a top offensive driver seemed numbered before the playoffs started. He scored just 51 points in the regular season, his lowest output in a decade. It would have been easy to look at that decline, his age (37) and his slow start with the Panthers down the stretch as signs of caution.

The diminutive, scrappy left winger has poured cold water on those potential concerns with an excellent playoff run. Marchand has scored eight goals and 18 points in 20 games, which is very impressive considering he doesn't get top power-play time. The 14 points he's scored at five-on-five are third-best in the playoffs behind only Connor McDavid and teammate Eetu Luostarinen. He's looked rejuvenated on the Panthers' elite third line with Luostarinen and Anton Lundell. They're relentless on the forecheck, using their pace, energy and competitiveness to win battles, control play and drive offense.

With Marchand on the ice, the Panthers have controlled 58.3 percent of expected goals and outscored teams by a ridiculous 18-5 margin at five-on-five. He's been excellent on Florida's penalty kill, too.

Marchand is proving that he's still got plenty of game left in his late 30s.

Matt Duchene, Dallas Stars

Stock down

Expectations were high for Duchene heading into the playoffs. He had been a dynamic, play-driving beast all year, scoring a team-high 82 points in the regular season. Duchene's line was flat-out one of the best second lines in the NHL.

However, for a second consecutive year, Duchene was a major letdown in the playoffs, slumping to just a single goal and five assists in 18 games. Remarkably, he didn't register a single even-strength point.

Duchene's individual shot rate at five-on-five fell by around 33 percent compared to the regular season. He was involved in some defensive breakdowns, with the Stars outscored 8-3 during his five-on-five minutes in the postseason. Bad luck is part of the story — Duchene's line generated a healthy 3.54 expected goals per 60 and scored on less than 3 percent of their shots — but there isn't a lot of solace to

be taken from that considering he produced just two goals and six points in 19 games during last year's run to the Western Conference final as well.

Duchene is still well-positioned to cash in on a lucrative contract because of his tremendous regular-season success and the weak UFA center market, but a second consecutive playoff failure raises questions about how well his play translates to the postseason when time and space are harder to come by.

Jamie Benn, Dallas Stars

Stock down

In 18 playoff games, Benn only netted one goal and three points and scored at an all-situations rate of 0.76 points per 60. That is a major drop from his regular-season production (2.4 points per 60) and his last two postseasons (2.76 in 2024, 2.38 in 2023).

The Stars only shot 4.71 percent at five-on-five in Benn's minutes, which explains the difference between expectations (3.23 xGF/60) and reality (1.10 GF/60). But *he* was one of the driving forces behind those finishing woes. His defense in tough minutes was lacking and contributed to the team getting outscored 13-4 with him deployed.

After revitalizing his game as a reliable third-line contributor over the last couple of years, the Bennaissance seems to be over in Dallas. He was always in for a pay cut after his \$9.5 million cap hit expired, but it could be more severe after this postseason. Evolving-Hockey projects a two-year, \$4.44 million extension, but that could be a little too rich for someone who looks like a bottom-six staple at this point in his career.

Connor Brown, Edmonton Oilers

Stock up

Heading into the playoffs, the Oilers had a glaring weakness: secondary scoring. Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl both hit the 100-point mark, but no other forward hit the 50-point threshold. While those two are still (unsurprisingly) leading the way this postseason, they have depth support.

That was especially clear in Round 1, when players like Brown stepped up with three goals and five points in six games. While he's only notched another three points since, he has been valuable. Brown has added an element of speed to the bottom six, disrupted opponents and helped limit opponents like Tomas Hertl along the way.

Brown realistically isn't in for a massive raise this summer from his current \$1 million cap hit. But his postseason play is a reminder of what he can bring to a lineup as a utility forward when he is fully back up to speed. It was just last year that Brown took 55 games to notch a single goal after returning from a torn ACL. Now he is providing much-needed support in the Stanley Cup Final on a budget, which should attract general managers.

John Klingberg, Edmonton Oilers

Stock up

It was fair to wonder how effective Klingberg would be when the Oilers signed him to a one-year deal in January.

Klingberg hadn't played an NHL game in 14 months after undergoing a serious resurfacing surgery on both of his hips. His play, especially defensively, had rapidly deteriorated in recent seasons. He was

borderline unplayable in 14 games for the Leafs in 2023-24 before the surgery, and his 2022-23 campaign, split between the Anaheim Ducks and Minnesota Wild, was a disappointment too.

With all that in mind, it would have been a win if Klingberg were simply a helpful No. 6 defenseman. Instead, he's shattered expectations by performing well in top-four usage.

Klingberg isn't as dynamic as his prime (four points in 18 games) and his defensive play can still be shaky at times, but his slick puck-moving has been a major asset. It's very meaningful, and frankly surprising, that he's providing legitimate value in a high-leverage role rather than requiring sheltering. That's going to get him paid a nice sum in free agency, especially since right-handed puck movers are always in demand.

ESPN / NHL draft combine notes: Top prospects, wild cards, more –

Kristen Shilton – June 11, 2025

Expect the unexpected.

That was the refrain at this year's NHL scouting combine about the upcoming draft. While a group of 90 prospective NHLers were put through their paces with interviews, dinners and fitness testing, scouts and executives alike marveled at what could be an unpredictable first round when it comes down to making selections on June 27 and 28.

"There are maybe 16 or 18 players I could see going in the top 10," one scout said. "It's one of those classes. Deep. Great character guys. Lots of these players have unique skill sets. Teams will have tough decisions to make."

Another executive pointed out that there's an "embarrassment of riches" at the forward positions for clubs with high selections. So, while Erie Otters defenseman Matthew Schaefer may look like a consensus No. 1 overall selection for the New York Islanders, what happens from there?

Intrigue!

"The internal conversations have been heated," the executive joked.

One name that came up plenty as a potential wild card? Carter Bear.

The Everett Silvertips forward did not participate in the combine's fitness testing after suffering an Achilles tendon injury in March, but he expects to be fully healthy when NHL training camps begin in the fall. Bear was tied for seventh in WHL scoring with 40 goals and 82 points through 65 games last season, and ranks 10th on the NHL Central Scouting final list of North American skaters and 13th overall on ESPN analyst Rachel Doerrie's latest big board.

If there were to be a jumper, though, Bear might be the guy. Despite not being able to go through the entire combine process, his body of work to date on the ice has clearly drawn serious attention from multiple clubs.

We've seen teams get creative in recent years -- Juraj Slafkovsky going first overall to Montreal in 2022 comes to mind -- and there could be another surprising first round awaiting us all in June. Until then, here's the news and notes from combine week.

Eklund, Frondell the best of (competitive) friends

Victor Eklund would not be denied.

He was going to play on a line with teammate Anton Frondell. And their coach, Robert Kimby, at Djurgardens IF wouldn't get a moment's peace until it happened.

"I think I told him like 10 times," Eklund said. "He was like, 'yeah, yeah, yeah.' But then finally, we did get to [play together]."

The alignment of two top prospects in the upcoming NHL draft had been years in the making, really. Eklund -- who had 19 goals and 31 points in 42 games last season -- and Frondell -- 11 goals and 25 points in 29 games -- started playing against each other as kids in their native Sweden, which is when Eklund first experienced just how talented Frondell was with the puck.

"When we were 10 years old, I remember playing him, and he actually made a move on me," Eklund recalled. "Like, [he put] the puck between my legs, and I just can't forget that. He says he doesn't remember that, but I kind of know. But we've been playing against each other, but we really got to know each other when both of us started playing for [our team]."

FrondeLL confessed that he did actually remember deking Eklund back in the day ("it was really good," he laughed) and shared what he appreciated the most about getting to share a line.

"Victor is easy to play with. I don't think I've played with someone with so much energy," FrondeLL said. "He wins every battle, even when we play against men. Victor wins all the puck battles, and it's just easy for me finding him in an open spot, and most of the times I get the puck right on the tape. So it's easy for me too, and we like playing with each other."

Eklund was effusive in his praise of FrondeLL to explain why he dogged their coach so incessantly about finally pairing them up in January.

"Anton, he's a tank on the ice," Eklund said. "He has a shot like a missile. He's just a really great, great player. I just knew from the beginning that if we get the opportunity, we'll take it and we'll be the best and I think we did pretty good."

And, yeah, the coach probably got sick of me asking so they [had to] finally put us together."

Michael Misa staying put

Michael Misa learned the hard way how patience is a virtue.

The Saginaw Spirit forward expected to be a center in the OHL. But the Spirit were so deep down the middle when he entered the league two years ago that Misa was thrust onto the wing instead. He excelled there, and it helped build a foundation for where he's at now -- with the potential to be a top-two selection in the draft.

But Misa was really just biding his time until the chance to slide back into a center spot presented itself.

It finally did for Misa's draft year -- and he pumped in 62 goals and 134 points in 65 games to lead the OHL in scoring.

Suffice to say, Misa isn't eager to change positions again anytime soon.

"Growing up in minor hockey, I was always primarily a center," Misa said. "My first two years [in the OHL], we had a number of good centers who were a lot older. So I had to make that jump to wing. But coming back to this year, it's what I planned to do for my draft year was go back to center and ultimately, I just feel a lot more confident down the middle. That's primarily where my roots are at."

Being able to dominate at the center spot has given Misa a boost going into the draft, where he's projected to be among the first players taken off the board. And whoever selects Misa is getting a skater who is prepared to suit up immediately in the NHL.

"I feel like I am ready to make that jump next year," Misa said. "That's ultimately my goal, to make the NHL next year. I think gaining that center experience that I had this year definitely helped my game. And I'm just trying to become that more reliable 200-foot player defensively as well. So overall, I am ready."

Misa said being at center allows him to be more "involved" in the play. "It's not just offensively, but defensively, being reliable," he said. "It's been good for me ... got a lot more puck touches, just carrying the play on my stick."

Will Horcoff sets scouting combine record

When an NHL team asked Michigan forward Will Horcoff which animal he would be off the ice, he answered a silverback gorilla.

Based on his horizontal jump at the combine, Horcoff might be better associated with the impala. Because just like an antelope, Horcoff can clear incredible distances in a single bound -- his 124.75-inch mark set a new combine record, a feat he trained hard to achieve.

"I knew I had a chance to do it coming in," said Horcoff, whose previous best jump was 122 inches. "It was just whether I executed it. And I did. I'm happy about it."

Horcoff -- the son of former NHLer Shawn Horcoff -- was focused on his horizontal moves but also wanted to show well in the vertical category. But his strategy had to change.

"It was a little weird; I jumped higher with my hands on my hips than I did with my arms," Horcoff said. "I don't know, at U-18 Worlds, I jumped 4½ inches higher than I did here. So I don't know what happened there."

The 6-foot-4, 181-pound center added -- perhaps unnecessarily -- that "I'm a competitive guy" so the discrepancy in his figures was perplexing. Still, Horcoff was pleased overall with how his work paid off in front of NHL scouts and executives from the 31 teams he met with throughout the combine week.

"I think I could be a skilled power forward in the NHL," Horcoff said. "I'd love to play like [Ottawa Senators forward] Brady Tkachuk. That [mean streak] is something I've added this season, and I think I'm going to continue doing it more consistently next season."

Oh, and why the gorilla pick?

"He's a leader," Horcoff said. "And he protects his family."

Players forced to confront their mistakes

The purpose of a combine is to put your best foot forward.

But that doesn't preclude some missteps from the past from reappearing.

Such was the case in certain team interviews, where execs asked prospects to break down footage of themselves from the season. And the videos weren't exactly positive.

"Pittsburgh did that," Moose Jaw Warriors forward Lynden Lakovic said. "They didn't show my highlights; they probably showed my lowlights, but asked me to break that down. It was good. I thought I handled it well. They weren't my greatest clips, but I'm aware of that, and I thought I broke it down pretty well."

Carlos Handel was similarly caught off guard by seeing his poor plays return front and center during the meet and greets.

"Carolina did that," the Halifax Mooseheads defenseman said. "They showed me some bad clips, and wanted, for example, how I react [to it], but also they wanted to know how my coach, for example, wants me to attack there and what my opinion about that [play] was."

If nothing else, these interviews kept prospects on their toes throughout the week.

"Most of the [talks] were fun," Lakovic said. "But there were a couple ones that were a little bit more intimidating."

Can Nashville do it all?

The Nashville Predators did not anticipate being a lottery team. But the best-laid plans sometimes go awry.

Nashville ended up finishing the season 30-44-8 -- but the lottery delivered the No. 5 overall pick, just one of the three selections they have in the first round. And there is talent to choose from that could potentially immediately help the Predators.

Boston College's James Hagens, Frondell or Brantford's Jake O'Brien could all be there at the fifth slot to bolster Nashville down the middle, and each has the potential crack an NHL lineup sooner than later. Brampton winger Porter Martone would also be a solid fit for Nashville.

The Predators signed Steven Stamkos in free agency last summer, and he would be an excellent mentor to any young player entering the league as well.

Speaking of Stamkos, the Predators didn't bring him on board for a rebuild. They will want to be back in the playoff mix next season. How they ultimately use the 23rd overall pick (acquired from the Tampa Bay Lightning) and the 26th pick (from the Vegas Golden Knights) will tell us plenty about what's to come this season from the Predators.